

BUYING HELP

INTRODUCTION

If you don't know what type of product you need, or are wondering whether or not a particular product will work with your computer, then contact *Buying Help*.

If you want to buy a new desktop or notebook computer, please provide details of how much you want to spend and the type of tasks you want your new PC to perform.

If you're looking to buy an upgrade for your computer, you need to include as much information about your current system as possible. Knowing your computer make and model, processor, amount of memory and motherboard model can help us provide more accurate advice.

Tom Royal

Our Labs Editor can recommend the best product for your specific requirements.

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Student-friendly notebook wanted

Q I am looking for a decent notebook computer for my 14-year-old daughter. I'd like to spend less than £550 including VAT. She'll be using the internet a lot for homework, and hopefully not so much for chatting on MSN Messenger. She would also like to use Microsoft PowerPoint and to connect to our wireless internet connection.

It doesn't need to be the best computer, but I don't necessarily want the very cheapest model, either, so I'd like something with a decent processor, plenty of memory and a decent hard disk. Could you recommend something suitable?

Paul Hopkins

A You can buy a notebook that's ideal for surfing the internet and homework for less than £550. In fact, Acer's Aspire 5101AWLMi costs even less; you can pick one up for just under £400 including VAT. Its 2GHz Turion processor isn't as quick as the latest Core 2 Duo chips, but it's more than quick enough for surfing the web or working on PowerPoint presentations. It has 1GB of memory, so it can run Windows Vista without problems. Its 120GB hard disk is capable of storing loads of media files. Look for it online using the part code LX.AX90X.017.

Unfortunately, you'll need to spend a little extra if your daughter wants to use PowerPoint. The cheapest version of Microsoft Office, Office Home and Student 2007, costs £93 including VAT. It includes the latest versions of Word, Excel PowerPoint and OneNote.



▲ Acer's Aspire 5101AWLMi is great value, but you'll also need to budget for a copy of Microsoft Office

Finally, if you're worried about your daughter spending more time using MSN Messenger than working on homework, Windows Vista could help. The new parental control features in Windows Vista allow you to set the computer to keep a log of internet activity, including instant message conversations, or limit the times at which a child is able to log on to the computer. It is possible to completely block an individual application such as MSN Messenger, too, but with so many alternative instant messaging systems available, this might prove unfeasible.

Powering up a projector

Q I am thinking about buying a projector such as the Panasonic PTAX100. I know that projector bulbs can be very expensive, though, and it would be annoying to have one break if a power cut occurred when the projector is in use. With this in mind, I'm thinking about buying a UPS device to power the projector.

Having checked its specifications, I know that the PTAX100 uses 290W of power when showing a picture. If there is a power cut, though, I would immediately hit the projector's power button. This would leave only the cooling fan running, so I imagine its power consumption would be far less. I assume that a 300W UPS would be suitable for this purpose; it could provide 290W for a few seconds, then far less for a few minutes as the fan runs.

Will a less powerful UPS, such as the APC Back-UPS ES 400VA 230V, which can provide only 240W, fail and simply cut out? Or is it the case that an overloaded UPS will continue to function but run for a shorter period of time?

Can you also suggest a UPS suitable for powering my PC, which draws around 175W, and my projector? I would place my computer in standby mode immediately should the power fail.

Jon Rose

A We've tested several devices for this month's Labs UPS review, and you'll find detailed results on page 108. We've also heard of many people who use UPS devices to protect their projectors against bulb failure should the power go out.

In our tests, we tried connecting a UPS device to a PC that required far more power than it was rated to



▲ Belkin's 1200VA UPS is a little expensive, but it has the power to keep a projector and PC running

provide. Despite a scary red warning light, the UPS didn't fail when the power was cut, and it ran happily long enough for us to shut down the computer. This said, we would never recommend trying this outside of a lab, let alone relying on an overloaded UPS to protect your equipment. If you want to look after your computer and projector, and avoid the risk of damaging your UPS, you should choose one that can provide enough power for them both.

Our favourite UPS device is the APC Back-UPS ES 700VA, but with a rating of 405W it's not powerful enough to run both your projector and your computer. For your purposes, we'd recommend the Belkin 1200VA Universal UPS. It can provide up to 670W of power, and although its software is unfriendly this won't be a problem if you plan to shut down your projector and PC manually. You'll find a full review on page 113.

A new Dimension

Q I'm a keen flight simulator pilot, but I'm fed up of running simulator software on my old Dell Latitude C610. Eventually, I plan to buy a Latitude D830, which uses an Nvidia Quadro NVS 140M graphics system. However, for the time being my father and I have agreed to go halves on a desktop.

We are considering the Dell Dimension E251, which costs between £350 and £400. Unfortunately, its graphics card isn't as good as I would like. With this in mind, I have chosen to upgrade the card to an ATI Radeon X1950GT AGP, Nvidia 7900GS or something similar. Would one of these cards be compatible with the Dimension E251?

Toby Reynolds

A We couldn't find a Dimension E251 on Dell's website, so we assume that this is a typing error and that you are intending to buy a Dimension E521 instead.



▲ Dell's Dimension E521 has a PCI Express x16 slot, so it can accept most modern graphics cards

The Dimension E521 comes with a choice of three graphics cards, none of which is particularly powerful, but you could choose the cheapest option and fit a more powerful graphics card of your own choice if you wish.

According to Dell's website, the E521 has a PCI Express x16 slot on its motherboard. This will allow you to fit an Nvidia GeForce 7900GS card, but not the ATI Radeon X1950GT AGP as this uses the older AGP interface. If you want to use a Radeon X1950GT card, there are many PCI Express versions available.

Campervan PC wanted

Q I shall soon be retiring, and intend to use my leisure time travelling the country in a campervan and enjoying my hobby of photography.

I'll need a notebook computer so I can upload my photos to a website and burn them to disc. I'd also like to watch the occasional TV programme. What are the minimum requirements I should look for, and can you recommend any suitable notebooks that cost no more than £800 including VAT?

Brian Clarke

A Fortunately, your budget of £800 is more than enough to get a computer suitable for your hobby. Uploading photos to the web and creating DVDs are tasks that can be accomplished by even relatively cheap computers. We'd recommend looking for a notebook with 1GB of memory, Windows Vista Home Premium and a 100GB hard disk. Vista Home Premium includes Media Center, which gives you a great interface to browse your photos and recorded TV programmes, and a 100GB hard disk should give you enough room to store plenty of pictures.

If you like to take photos using a digital camera in RAW mode, where each image file takes up around 30MB of disk space, an even larger hard disk would be useful, so look for a notebook with 120GB or more.

With this in mind, we'd recommend the Acer Aspire 5101AWLmi. It's an excellent budget notebook computer with a DVD burner, so you can write your photos to disc, and a big 120GB hard disk to hold loads of photos. It doesn't include a TV tuner, but at around £400 including VAT it'll leave you with plenty of budget left to buy one. Our favourite is the Terratec Cinergy DT USB XS Diversity, which costs around £80 including VAT and includes two aerials.

► Terratec's XS Diversity will allow you to keep up with the latest programmes



Desperately seeking Palm OS

Q For the last five years, I've used a Sony Clie organiser to keep track of my contacts and diary. Sadly, it finally died last week. Having been perfectly happy with it, I went to PC World to try to buy another, more recent model. Surprisingly, the salesperson told me he hadn't seen any Clie devices for years, and that I should buy a handheld running the Windows Mobile system instead. I tried a few in the shop, but it felt unfamiliar so I went home to do some research.

As far as I can tell, my Clie ran a system called Palm OS, which seems to have fallen out of favour over the past few years. Can I still buy an organiser that runs Palm OS?

Derek McCloud

► You can still buy a few devices that run Palm OS



A Sony's Clie organisers did indeed run a customised version of the Palm OS operating system, but the entire range was discontinued in 2004. Microsoft's Windows Mobile has since become the most common operating system for handheld devices, but it is still possible to buy a PDA that runs a newer version of the Palm OS operating system. Palm manufactures a few itself, with the Tungsten E2 costing around £140 including VAT from www.dabs.com.

Alternatively, instead of using an organiser and a separate mobile phone, you could cut down on devices and buy a smartphone that runs Palm OS. Most smartphones use either Windows Mobile or the Symbian operating system, but Palm's Treo 680, which costs around £30 with a £25-per-month phone contract, feels well made and runs a version of Palm OS that has been customised to make it easy to use, with or without a stylus.

Can I re-use my old hard disk?

Q I have recently upgraded the hard disk in my notebook computer from 80GB to 120GB, and this has given me a lot more room for the TV programmes that I record using my Freeview USB TV tuner. Originally I was planning to sell the old SATA hard disk. However, then it occurred to me that it could be useful for ferrying files between my desktop and notebook computers.

Is there a simple way that I can connect it to both my desktop and notebook, such as a USB adaptor, for example?

Carl Gonzales

A The best way to re-use an old notebook hard disk is to pop it inside a USB2 disk caddy. This transforms it into a portable external hard disk that you can use to transfer files between computers. There are dozens available, but one in particular might suit you. The Raidsonic Icy Box IB-266StUSD-B is a sleek metal case for your disk that provides both USB and eSATA connections, but it also comes with a docking station. This fits into a spare 3½in drive bay on your desktop computer and allows you to plug in the disk quickly whenever you want to access files, then eject it to take the disk away with you. It costs just £28 including VAT. ☐



▲ The Icy Box includes a docking station, making it very convenient to use